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AUTHOR Gerdes, Dana Michelle
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ABSTRACT

A national literacy goal is that every child will read by third grade. Teachers must learn appropriate strategies to teach reading so that this goal can be realized; however, for some this goal may be overwhelming. The challenge comes into the reading class when looking at the unique differences and reading levels of the students. Teaching reading in a whole group setting may not always be effective or appropriate given individual differences. The purpose of this thesis is to identify, define, and explore effective grouping strategies for teaching reading in the primary classroom. The goal of reading by third grade can be attained if teachers can meet the unique needs of students by using the best grouping strategies and tools available, utilizing early intervention, and encouraging differentiated learning at all levels. (Contains 34 references.) (Author/RS)

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EFFECTIVE GROUPING STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING READING IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Education

Biola University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

Dana Michelle Gerdes

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M.A. Thesis

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Dana Michelle Gerdes

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Approved by:

Department Chair: _____ Date: 5/8/01

Capstone Chair: June Hetzel, Ph.D. Date: 5/8/01

Second Reader: _____ Date: 5/8/01

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Dana Michelle Gerdes

A national literacy goal is that every child will read by third grade. Teachers must learn appropriate strategies to teach reading so that this goal can be realized; however, for some this goal may be overwhelming. The challenge comes into the reading class when looking at the unique differences and reading levels of the students. Teaching reading in a whole group setting may not always be effective or appropriate given individual differences. The purpose of this thesis is to identify, define, and explore effective grouping strategies for teaching reading in the primary classroom. The goal of reading by third grade can be attained if teachers can meet the unique needs of students by using the best grouping strategies and tools available, utilizing early intervention, and encouraging differentiated learning at all levels.

EFFECTIVE GROUPING STRATEGIES FOR

TEACHING READING IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

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Introduction

Literacy is of great concern in California and throughout the country because the ability to read is essential to the future of this country's children. Illiteracy is associated with the problems of school drop out rates, unemployment, and even jail time.

> One need not look beyond school dropout data, prison rosters, or public assistance rolls to find that the problem of illiteracy is pervasive and is especially common to many who are not succeeding in a society whose literacy demands continue to exacerbate the divisions between the haves and have-nots. Literacy levels are positively associated with both higher annual income and lower unemployment. On the other hand, the absence of proficient reading and writing skills is associated not only with academic failure and dropping out of school, but also with unemployment and involvement with the judicial system (Cornwall & Bawden, 1992, in California Department of Education, 1999).

Knowledge of the importance of literacy and its key role in the success of each student spurs on educators to teach reading more effectively. The national goal is that all children will read by third grade (Taylor & Pearson, 1999, pg. 156). This places a great deal of pressure on

the primary teachers that teach reading in kindergarten through third grade since teaching from a published reading curriculum to a whole group may not be enough to meet the needs of the students in the primary classroom. Thus, the classroom teacher must find effective strategies that allow each child in the class to have the most access to reading.

Teachers carry the responsibility of using the best possible strategies to provide opportunities for students to practice reading material at their level. Schumm, Moody, and Vaughn (2000) suggest that the classroom structure created by the teacher may have a direct influence on a student's reading achievement. "The way in which teachers structure classroom instruction can determine how students interact with each other and with the teacher, which in turn can affect the cognitive and affective outcomes of instruction" (Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000, pg. 477).

While there is difficulty in meeting all of the reading needs of students strictly in a whole group situation, allowing students the time they need with a text at an appropriate level in small groups can be an effective solution. In a study by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), common practices of effective schools and accomplished teachers were discovered. "Time spent in small-group instruction for reading distinguished the most effective schools from the other schools in the study and was offered by teachers in these schools as a reason for their success" (Taylor & Pearson, 1999, p.157). The study also indicates that the most

effective schools spent 60 minutes in small-group instruction, 25 minutes in whole-group instruction, and 28 minutes in independent reading.

Questions still linger in the minds of teachers when the idea of using small groups is mentioned. Some teachers experience anxiety when thinking of implementing small-groups in a classroom. Management concerns, unclear definitions of small groups, and time constraints are just a few of the deterrents for teachers leading to their hesitation in using small groups. Making matters worse, many teachers feel inadequately trained and prepared to teach reading to students of varying levels.

> In a survey of 108 elementary teachers, only 33% of the teachers indicated that they received adequate training on a wide variety of grouping patterns in their teacher preparation programs. Most teachers reported that whole class (mixed ability) instruction was covered in their preservice education, but less than 40% of the teachers reported coverage of small groups, and even less coverage of individualized instruction and pairing. Moreover, flexible grouping was not addressed at all (Moody & Schumm, 1999, pg. 319).

Another major issue for teachers is identifying which types of small groups are best to use for reading. There are many different grouping strategies for reading in the primary grades. The types of small groups that

could be implemented in a primary classroom will be identified and discussed to assist teachers in determining how they can effectively use these strategies in their reading programs.

Historical Overview of Grouping Students

Historically, the norm for reading instruction in elementary education has been within-class homogeneous grouping. "From the turn of the century to the present, within-class, same-ability grouping has been the most common format for reading instruction" (Barr & Dreeben, 1991, in Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn, 2000, pg. 477). This grouping strategy of dividing a class into three groups based on reading ability is also called ability grouping. Elbaum and Vaughn (1999) state that this practice began to draw criticism in the 1970's and 1980's on the grounds that ability grouping lowers the self-esteem of the students involved, lowers the motivation of students with reading problems, restricts friendship choices of students, and widens the gap between those in high and low groups (pg. 399).

Recently, there has been a trend towards heterogeneous grouping in an attempt to move away from ability groups and tracking. Schumm, Moody, & Vaughn (2000) suggest several reasons for this shift in grouping strategies. First, research has not supported the use of ability groups. Second, the quality and content of instruction has shown to be inferior in low ability groups. Third, a concern has risen about the social and motivational

effects of these groups on students (Schumm, Moody & Vaughn, 2000, pg. 478).

Ability groups are still used by teachers, but the use of other grouping formats continues to increase. Alternative grouping practices that may be currently found in primary classrooms are cooperative groups, cross-age tutoring, and flexible groups. "Alternative grouping formats were developed to help classroom teachers accommodate different students' needs and to avoid the negative outcomes that have been associated with the use of ability-based reading groups" (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999, pg. 399).

The Goal of an Effective Reading Program

What is the goal of an effective reading program? Whether a teacher uses whole group, small group, or individual instruction the goal is clear: to help children build the strategies necessary to become an effective reader. Teachers, parents, and administrators have debated the definition of an effective reader. Marie Clay defines an effective reader in the following way:

> With effective readers early strategies are secure and habituated. The child monitors his own reading. He searches for cues in meaning, in word sequences, and in letter sequences. He discovers new things for himself. He cross-checks one source of cues with another. He repeats as if to confirm his reading so far. He self-corrects

assuming the initiative for making cues match. He solves new words by these means. (Clay, in Traill, 1993, pg. 21).

Whole Group Reading Instruction

Whole group reading instruction is a necessary part of the elementary classroom. This technique involves teaching to the entire class at the same time, using one selection of text. The concern is that this instructional technique can be the only one used in many classrooms, even though student needs and levels are different. "Use of the whole class instruction was the practice even when differences in children's abilities were so great as to be obvious to anyone willing to take but a few minutes to observe. Such differences meant that some children kept hearing what they already knew; for others, the observed lesson was too difficult and proceeded too quickly" (Durkin, 1990, in Moody & Vaughn, 2000, pg. 305).

Teaching the whole group from one text targets the middle reading level or grade level being taught, which may only include a few students in the classroom. This causes boredom for some and confusion for others. The solution is to use whole group instruction a portion of the reading period, but spend a majority of the time in small groups. "A comprehensive review of small group instruction was recently conducted by Lou et al. (1996). The findings indicated that small group learning is associated with higher academic achievement than whole class instruction without grouping" (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999).

Perhaps the biggest advantage of using small groups instead of only teaching to the whole group is increased student interaction with the text. Moody and Schumm (1999) state that it is imperative that students have the opportunity to practice reading material that is at their instructional level. In the typical classroom, where large numbers of students of varying levels are learning together, whole class instruction alone will not allow for the necessary differentiation. Clearly, using small groups in teaching reading is a solution to this need to reach students at varying levels.

Heterogeneous Groups

A heterogeneous group is a grouping strategy in which the teacher groups students with differing abilities, developmental levels, and reading achievement. The goal of this grouping strategy is that the students who are at a higher reading level will be good models and help those reading at a lower level. "Unlike students placed in homogeneous groups, students in heterogeneous groups learn to respect and value other class members. Higher level students learn to take responsibility for helping others" (Manning & Manning, 1995, pg. 90).

Cooperative Groups

Cooperative or collaborative groups, which are examples of heterogeneous groups, entail mixed ability groups working together to complete a task. This grouping strategy is not a mere seating arrangement.

Moody and Schumm (1999) report on the common misconception of teachers:

> Teachers often think of groups and seating arrangements as one in the same. Teachers often report that they implemented cooperative/collaborative groups, although observations revealed that all instruction involved the class as a whole. The explanation for the discrepancy between teacher reports of grouping practices and observed practices was that teachers identified student sitting in mixed ability clusters of four to six children as cooperative/collaborative grouping (pg. 323).

Cooperative groups involve planning and direction by the teacher including directed lessons given to the whole group. Slavin (1991) states that cooperative learning does not take the place of "plain old good instruction," rather cooperative groups should supplement the lessons given by the teacher (pg. 88). Each student in the group must play an active role in completing a given assignment or task. The students must interact and work together doing their specific jobs in order for the task to be completed. The goal of cooperative groups is to get the students engaged in the learning process and help one another learn a particular academic area.

Slavin's research has shown that cooperative groups are highly effective when properly planned and used in the classroom. Two essential

features of effective cooperative groups are creating group goals and setting up a means for individual accountability for members of the group (Slavin, 1991, pg.99). These features must be in place along with proper planning and instruction by the teacher for positive outcomes to occur. The possible positive outcomes of using cooperative groups are numerous. Slavin (1991) states that cooperative groups can be helpful in many educational problems such as: emphasizing thinking skills, increasing higher level thinking, a means to improve race relations, and as a way to prepare children for situations in today's workforce (pg. 88).

Incorporating reading teams into reading instruction is an example of a cooperative grouping strategy. For example, Thompson and Taymans (1994) suggest the following:

> While one student reads a page, the helper follows along in order to assist with strategies and to gain information needed to answer a comprehension question about the page. After the reader completes the page, the helper has to answer a question about the page. The reader assists the helper in answering the question, and is invested in doing so, as both partners receive the same grade on the comprehension questions. Students not only receive a great deal of practice while reading in teams, but also are

actively engaged in relevant tasks at all times, thus retaining interest throughout the class (pg. 25).

Literature Circles

Another heterogeneous grouping strategy is the use of literature circles. These groups consist of approximately five students that have an interest in a certain genre of literature. The students in the group decide together which book they would like to read within that specific genre. After the book is read the students come back together to discuss it in their literature circle. The literature circle could also break a longer text into parts or chapters for older students that are reading novels. "The purpose is to discuss literature in ways that help children think deeply about a book so it becomes an important part of their life" (Sanacore, 1993, pg.68).

Homogeneous Grouping

A homogeneous group is a grouping strategy in which the teacher groups students working at the same reading or ability level. These groups tend to be stagnant and lack movement from group to group. In fact, this grouping technique has been criticized by some in recent years and has been labeled as a form of tracking. "With the widespread criticism of tracking and ability grouping on both academic and social grounds there has been a shift away from this type of instructional grouping" (Moody & Schumm, 1999, p.319).

Tracking consists of a teacher dividing a class into several groups based on the student's reading level. Sometimes students who are put into these low, medium, and high level groups stay within their respective levels throughout their career as a student. Furthermore, each student often knows which group everyone else is in. It becomes hard for a student to get out of a group and move to a higher one. "This practice holds back the reader in a lower group placement as reading groups become the determinant of achievement" (Wiggins,1994, pg. 450). In other words, the group a student is placed in determines achievement rather than the actual reading performance of the child. A student will stay in the lower group even if progress is made in reading and he/she is ready academically to move up to a higher group.

An area of concern is that a teacher's attitudes toward the high, middle, and low levels of tracked reading groups differ. This is especially evident in the pacing of instruction, which can be a predictor of gains in reading achievement. The Commission on Reading (1985) states that there is a striking variation in pacing between reading groups at varying levels. Furthermore, they report that on average high ability groups covered considerable more running words of text per week than the low ability groups. The difference in the average first grade classroom was 1100 words in the high groups compared to 400 in the low groups (pg. 87).

Another area in which teachers' attitudes differ between groups is in correcting errors. Wiggins (1994) states: "Teachers treated low group students differently when it came to correcting errors. They corrected below level students more often than on-grade-level students. Teachers also focused on comprehension with high groups as opposed to decoding skills with low groups (pg. 450)."

In the past, a problem with homogeneous grouping by reading level has been that students are put into groups based on a reading score on a standardized test. This score lumps together all the components of reading achievement into one score, rather than specifying areas of difficulty, such as comprehension, word attack skills, or vocabulary acquisition. When students who earn similar scores on standardized tests are put into one group, a teacher may still struggle with planning lessons to meet the varying needs of the children. The reason for this struggle may be that one composite score does not reflect the full scope of a student's literacy needs; therefore, the effectiveness of the grouping is limited.

Effective homogeneous grouping is based on specific literacy assessments that identify specific needs such as blends, vowels, inference, and verb tense. These student needs could be remediated in small groups in a homogeneous setting for a short period of time. When homogeneous groups are used in reading instruction, the planning and incorporation of appropriate instructional materials are keys to their effectiveness. The

teacher must plan lessons for each group taking into account the needs of the students in the group. Teaching each group the same lesson using the same materials is not an effective use of small groups. "Small group instruction and homogeneous grouping are most effective when instructional materials were varied to meet the needs of student in different groups. [Unfortunately,] most teachers do not provide differentiated materials even though students' instructional reading levels varied considerably" (Moody & Vaughn, 2000, pg. 306).

In 1985 the Commission on Reading concluded that grouping students by ability may slow the progress of low ability students. "Both the quantity and quality of instruction for low groups need improvement. Some of the problems with ability grouping can be alleviated by switching group assignments periodically, and using criteria other than ability for group assignment" (pg. 92).

Despite the criticism of homogeneous grouping, it may be useful in the classroom setting. Slavin (in Wiggins, 1994) identified the criteria for effective homogeneous grouping:

> (a) the grouping must be based on the specific skill being taught, (b) the plan must be flexible enough to allow for misassignments and changes in student achievement, and (c) most important, the teacher must actually vary the pace

> and level of instruction to correspond to the students' levels of readiness and learning rates (pg. 451).

Flexible Grouping

Homogeneous groups are making a comeback in the form of flexible groups. These groups are created according to the ability or needs of a student in a specific area of reading. In a study of effective schools by Taylor and Pearson (1999), small groups in four effective schools tended to be based on ability.

> While this practice may seem reminiscent of an earlier age when we tracked students in Grade 1 into groups in which they would remain for the rest of their school lives, it was different in these schools. Movement across groups was common because of their commitment to regular, systematic assessment and to early interventions. The assessments gave them the evidence they needed to take stock of progress on a regular basis (at least three times per year); the interventions provided the means to accelerate the growth of those most at risk. Thus group boundaries were quite permeable; children were not doomed to lifetime, or even yearlong, membership in particular reading groups (Taylor & Pearson, 1999, pg. 158).

Flexible groups are useful in both social interaction and academic achievement since students are able to meet with others that are struggling in a similar area and work toward a common goal. Additionally, the groups change often, which helps students learn acceptance of others and the life skill of working with new people. This grouping technique can be effective academically because it assists the teacher in targeting an area needing improvement, thus meeting the academic needs of the student. "Flexible grouping fulfills a variety of purposes, from enabling students to use their strongest modalities and promoting group interaction to the teaching of specific skills" (Opitz, 1999, pg. 35).

Random Grouping

Michael Opitz (1999) suggests a variety of random grouping options. Random grouping is picking a group of students to work together by chance. These groups are created randomly by picking names out of a hat, counting off, etc. Interest groups are another type of flexible group in which students assign themselves to a group based on an interest in a certain topic. Task groups are assigned based on students using their talents in a group with similar talents. "For example, when having students dramatize a story, ask those who are artistic to paint a theatrical backdrop and those with a musical talent to play an instrument" (Opitz, 1999, p.36).

Random grouping is flexible because the groups do not stay together for a long period of time. The random group is generally used for short term

tasks and disbands when the task is completed. The teacher's role is to decide when random groups are appropriate and to groups the students. These groups are easy to form because the random selection frees the teacher from choosing groups based on any form of assessment or developmental level. Random groups are effective for the teacher in mixing students socially and creating interest. Students also find this grouping format fun, refreshing, and motivating because of the variety it adds to the classroom setting.

Needs-Based Grouping

Needs-based skill groups are another form of flexible grouping. After a whole group lesson is given, follow-up lessons are provided to small groups based on the observed needs of the students. Some of the groups may be provided with enrichment activities while others may need more work on a certain skill. "Although the teacher would assess the level of the students initially and frequently throughout the year, assessments would not be used for placement, but for planning instructional needs" (Wiggins, 1994, pg. 455).

This form of flexible grouping changes often depending on observable needs at the time of the lesson. The teacher, an aide, or a trained volunteer often lead these groups. "Skill groups must be organized for children in need, last only until the need is met, and be linked to a meaningful context" (Sanacore, 1993, pg.68). Some examples of needs-

based flexible groupings are guided reading groups and skill-based mini lessons.

Guided Reading

Guided reading, another from of flexible grouping, can also assist in successful reading instruction. Guided reading takes place in a small group with the teacher in the role of facilitator and coach. "Guided reading is reading by children. It is the approach within a balanced program where children are both supported and challenged to assume responsibility for controlling the first whole reading of a new text" (Traill, 1993, pg. 6).

Margaret Mooney describes a guided reading lesson as when a teacher and a small group of children talk, think, and read through a text which offers manageable challenges for each reader (Mooney, 1995, pg.54). Guided reading provides scaffolding to support children as they begin to read. The teacher does not give answers or call out words to help the student along. Rather, the teacher observes the area in which a child may be struggling and gives him/her strategies to use to help further the reading process. Leanna Traill (1993) describes the teacher's role in guided reading as using teachable moments to there fullest.

> "Guided reading provides for individualized instruction within a small group context. It enables the teacher to capitalize on 'teachable moments' as a session progresses to reinforce, to encourage, and to prompt a reader to

attend to what needs to be thought about and acted upon in context" (pg. 6).

These teachable moments can only be acted upon in a small group setting to provide insight as to how a child really grapples with text.

Guided reading can be an effective strategy to use with emergent readers, early stage readers, and fluent readers. The goals and planning of the teacher must be level appropriate and may change as the student's reading level increases. Guided reading at the emergent stage will reinforce that words and printed text carry a message and the goal of reading is to decode that message. Rhyming or predictive text with helpful illustrations would be a good choice for book selection in the emergent guided reading groups.

As a child moves up in reading level and gains more confidence he is considered an early stage reader. Support in a guided reading group is still very important at this stage to build on strategies that were begun in the emergent stage of reading. "Guided reading at the early stage reinforces early reading behaviors and understandings. More and more responsibility is assumed by the readers for predicting, integrating cues, checking, searching, monitoring, and self-correcting meaning in texts of increased length and complexity" (Traill, 1993, pg. 7).

The fluency stage is achieved when the children have confidence and can read most texts on their own. A fluent reader self corrects and has

the tools and strategies needed to decode text on his own. The focus in this stage of reading should be comprehension. "Guided reading at the fluent stage focuses on observing and checking comprehensive strategies. Readers are guided to reflect, challenge, explore, and interpret what they have read" (Traill, 1993, pg. 7). The higher levels of questions in Bloom's taxonomy are excellent to use at this level.

The teacher has three main tasks in using guided reading groups for instruction. The first is to create groups of four to six students based on reading level. "You could consider grouping children by identifying those working at approximately the same developmental stage and displaying some common attitudes, understandings and behaviors" (Mooney, 1995, pg. 55). The teacher can use running records to find the instructional level of each child before placement in a guided reading group.

The second task of the teacher is to find appropriate books for each group. Multiple copies of the same text should be used in a group so that each child has access to his/her own book. The books must be chosen with the instructional level of the children in mind. Margaret Mooney suggests that the material chosen for a guided reading lesson should merit the time and attention of the reader and match the student's developmental stage of reading (Mooney, 1995, pg. 55). Things to consider when choosing books for a group are print size, amount of print on a page, illustrations, length, repetitive text, and topic.

The third main task of the teacher is to act as a coach or facilitator during the reading session. "The role of the teacher is one of being the stage manager who stands back 'in the wings' observing the reader. You intervene only when you need to move in to help the reader reset the stage" (Mooney, 1995, pg. 57). The teacher introduces the book and asks for predictions about the text. The role changes to observer while the students are engaged in reading the text. After the reading, the students can be brought together again and discuss the text by answering the teacher's questions.

The fourth task of the teacher is to make and record observations to determine instructional needs during the group sessions. The teacher must observe the strategies students are already using and which strategies they are not. Other observations can include student self-confidence, matching pictures to text, self-correction, self monitoring, and decoding. These observations can be written down as anecdotal notes for easy reference in preparation for future group sessions. These notes will be helpful also in deciding whether the child should stay in this group, change groups, work on a new strategy, or work on a different book.

Opitz (1998) suggests using text sets in guided reading to expose students to collections of books related to a certain topic. Text sets are especially useful when multiple copies of one book are not available. This eases the struggle that many teachers have trying to cope with a lack of

resources and availability of books for guided reading. Using text sets also allows for students at varying instructional levels to come together in one group. Students in the group each read a different book at varying difficulty levels that all pertain to one subject. The group then comes back together and the teacher leads the group in a discussion about the various books to have the students relate what they learned to the others in the group. Opitz states, "One of the main reasons for using text sets is that they enable all children to be exposed to 'real' books right from the start resulting in children seeing themselves as readers" (Opitz, 1998, pg.622).

Skill-Based Mini Lessons

Mini lessons are usually associated with reading or writing workshop and are in many cases given to the whole class. Mini lessons can also be given to a group of students that need help in a certain skill area. Skill-based mini lessons are defined by Mary Ellen Giacobbe (in Avery, 1993) as "conventions of English usage that are important to help readers with meaning" (pg.133). The teacher pulls together a small flexible group to have a short lesson on a certain skill in which those particular students are struggling. This group stays together for this one lesson and then disbands again. The teacher decides on placement in this group based on a perceived need in a certain skill area at a particular time.

Several characteristics are apparent in an effective skill-based mini lesson. Avery (1993) states that effective mini-lessons are: "short, usually

under five minutes in length; focused, even though several issues may be apparent; gentle in tone; and responsive, lessons are determined by the needs of the students in the classroom" (pg. 133).

Assessment

Assessment is helpful and necessary for teachers to identify students' needs, make instructional decisions about how best to help each student, and assist in planning effective reading lessons. Shearer and Homan (1994) describe reading assessment in this way:

> Reading assessment is the gathering of information to determine a student's developmental reading progress; it answers the question "At what level is this student reading?" In addition, assessment procedures provide information about the student's comprehension and decoding strategies, interest, attitudes, and communication skills. Teachers are engaged in assessment when they observe student behavior, review standardized tests, administer teacher-made tests, and use questioning procedures (pg. 1).

The goal of assessment is to give the teacher a clearer picture of what the student knows, the developmental level of the student, and insight into where the student needs help. Assessment should guide planning and be used as a tool to increase growth in reading. Standardized assessment

does not give the total picture of the student in enough detail to be used to guide planning. Many teachers are now using authentic assessment to guide planning because it gives more valuable information into the process of reading.

Standardized Assessment

Standardized tests are widely used and hold a prominent position in student assessment throughout our country today. "Formal standardized tests are often administered to students not only to evaluate individual performance but to let parents and other interested parties know how a school district is doing in relation to other schools in the state or in the nation" (Bear & Barone, 1998, pg.164). These tests are popular because of the ability to compare groups or individual students. Standardized tests are also called norm-referenced tests because they were developed by publishers based on norms or standards of comparisons.

Bear & Barone (1998) state that the two most important characteristics of norm-referenced (standardized) tests are their content and reliability. "A [standardized] test must actually measure your achievement in the areas tested (content validity) and that if you took the test on several occasions, your scores would be similar (reliability)" (pg.411). Therefore, high reliability and validity are important factors in the ability to compare scores to other groups or individuals.

Many educators are dissatisfied with formal standardized tests and critics are quick to point out the test's faults. "We are told that America's children are the most tested but the least examined in the world. We require students to take tests that produce scores but do not collect the multifaceted typed of information needed to analyze their learning" (Valencia, 1997, pg. 63). In other words, America's students are required to take lengthy tests that do not provide the detailed information that is necessary for teachers to meet students' needs.

There are several problems associated with too much reliance on standardized tests. Valencia (1997) states, "Standardized tests often assess isolated skills rather than real reading ability, emphasize lower level comprehension, rely on multiple-choice formats that are unfamiliar and confusing for students, and produce scores that are not informative for planning instruction" (pg. 63).

Another problem associated with standardized testing is the attempt to produce tests that try to encompass too much information and serve all audiences in need of educational performance information. The results from these "high-stakes" standardized tests are given to the community, administrators, and educators and are getting more weight in educational decisions. "The increased investment in assessment time and money has tended to give these tests even more importance in determining school

accountability and in high-stakes educational decisions" (Farr, 1992, pg. 30).

Standardized test results can be of some value to the public, administrators, and teachers. The concern is that an overemphasis on test results will give an inaccurate picture of reading achievement. The Commission on Reading (1985) gave the following conclusions for the use of standardized testing:

> It is likely that overemphasis on performance on skill master tests unbalances a reading program, leading attention away from the integrated act of reading. Standardized tests do not provide a deep assessment of reading comprehension and should be supplemented with observations of reading fluency. If schools are to be held accountable for test scores, the test scores must be broad-gauged measures that reflect the goals of reading instruction as closely as possible. The proper attitude toward standardized tests is one of balance. Tests yield information that is of some value, but its significance should not be exaggerated out of proportion (pg. 101).

Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment is using activities that closely resemble real-life and classroom reading experiences to assess reading progress rather

than a test full of multiple choice questions on isolated skills. "Authentic reading assessment requires students to demonstrate reading rather than recognize correct responses. Students read, respond, and interact with real books; engage in meaningful discussions; write about what they read; and set personal goals" (Valencia, 1997, pg. 66).

Authentic assessments are useful for the teacher in planning appropriate lessons based on the observations in real-life reading situations. These assessments give the teacher a wealth of information that standardized tests simply cannot. Farr (1992) suggests that a variety of authentic assessments exist that have several things in common. They are:

- highly individualized, even though they may take place during activities that involve groups of students
- a part of classroom activities and instruction designed to match an individual student's strengths to develop more incisive and creative use of language
- activities that integrate several language behaviors
- chances to use critical thinking and to express unique and emerging reactions and responses to ideas encountered in text
- models that encourage and develop self-assessment by the student, making him or her aware of the language-related strengths that are developing (pg. 35)

The key in using authentic assessments is for the teacher to have a clear focus on the behaviors he or she is looking for. The assessment must be closely situated to established classroom activities to most closely resemble the reading process. Valencia (1997) summarizes authentic assessment in this way:

> Authentic classroom assessment includes multiple measures of student learning, all of which are aimed at providing information that is useful for planning instruction. Unlike standardized reading tests, these assessments provide students with authentic texts of appropriate difficulty and a variety of types of support to meet their needs. Because teachers are focused on what they are teaching and thus, on what they want to assess, the assessments are aligned with instruction and with individual students' needs. The assessment fits the child rather than trying to make the child fit the assessment. As a result, authentic classroom assessment is more likely to assess the growth, no matter how large or small, that characterized real learning (pg. 68).

Concepts About Print

Concepts about print is a form of authentic assessment that encompasses all that a student already knows about print through previous

experiences and access to print. The Concepts about print (C.A.P.) assessment involves the teacher asking the child a variety of simple questions such as: Where is the front of the book?, Where is the back of the book?, Where is the title?, Where should you start reading?, etc. The teacher then records the responses of the child and keeps the recording sheet for future reference and planning. Many published forms of C.A.P. (Concepts of Print) exist, but all have the same basic goal: to see how a child attends to print.

Throughout the series of simple questions the teacher observes a child handling a book and discovers what the child knows about text. Marie Clay (1993) suggests several concepts or movements to look for:

- left page before a right page
- top of the page downwards
- left to right across a line
- return sweep to the left of the next line
- left to right across a word
- the use one can make of spaces
- what is the "first letter" (pg. 19)

Concepts about print (C.A.P.) is recommended for school entrants (Clay, 1998, pg. 111) and is used by many teachers in Preschool and primary grades at the beginning of the school year. According to Clay (1998), recent research has shown the varying levels of what preschool

children notice about print before they even come to school correlates to their exposure to print and previous experience with text. This prior knowledge that children bring to school can affect how soon they move into reading and writing. Therefore, it is important for a teacher to assess the child's prior knowledge and experience by using a concepts of print assessment.

C.A.P. can be useful for a teacher, but it should not be used as a predictor of reading success. Clay (1998) suggests that the teacher use the information from C.A.P. to give more focused help to the least prepared child in the first few years of school experience so that the child may find success later in reading (pg. 115). This can serve as a tool used for early intervention for a child's reading progress.

Running Records

One struggle of teachers is knowing how the child is processing while reading because the action takes place in the child's head. However, the teacher must know this process to be able to help the child's progress in reading. The teacher cannot go inside the child's head, but through careful observation and recording techniques during oral reading, the teacher can get a good picture of how the child is processing and the current struggles and needs of the child. Clay (1991) states that a teacher knows the developmental progress of a child:

- if she knows the child well

- if she has some records which catch current behavior in such a way that it can be referred to some weeks later
- if she sets aside time for observation periods when she pays close attention to precisely what individual children are doing (pg.210).

A running record is a systematic way to record a child's reading behavior by observing oral reading. This is an individual assessment of the child's use of reading strategies. The teacher sits down with an individual child and records observations while the child reads a book at or near his instructional level. "The most important strategic observations to make are all the oral responses to the written text, including true report, error, attack, repetition, self-correction, and comments on words and letters" (Clay, 1991, pg. 212). Every error (miscue) the child makes and strategy he uses in reading the book provides important information for the teacher. After the reading is done and the miscues are recorded, a miscue analysis can then be done by the teacher to plan for instruction the child may need in a certain area. In other words, the teacher gathers the information from the oral reading, analyzes in what area (or reading strategy) the child needs the most help, and plans further instruction accordingly. The teacher should keep every observation and running record to show the developmental reading progress of the child.

Anecdotal Notes

Anecdotal notes capture a snapshot of the behaviors a student demonstrates at a certain period of time as observed by the teacher. These notes are written by the teacher and are kept to show student progress and growth. "The goal is to capture the development of the child as it happens and to create a more complete picture of the whole child" (Parker et. al., 1995, pg. 623).

A variety of anecdotal note taking methods exist including the use of sticky notes, writing in folders, 3x5 cards, etc. These notes should be kept in a folder the teacher keeps so that they can be referred to later. Anecdotal notes will help the teacher be more observant in recording behaviors and will give the teacher insights into the student's development.

Portfolios

A portfolio is a form of authentic assessment in which the teacher and student work together to create a collection of works that reflect the student's progress in an area. A portfolio is not just a large folder to store work, but rather a carefully collected ensemble of observations, writing samples, reading logs, etc. The portfolio will provide a holistic picture of the student's ability and development. Valencia (1990) states that the portfolio approach has great appeal to students and teachers because it captures and capitalizes on the best each student has to offer, it encourages many

ways to evaluate learning, and it has integrity and validity that no other type of assessment can offer (pg. 338).

Farr (1992) suggests a few necessary requirements in using portfolios as an effective form of assessment:

- The portfolio belongs to the student and they should have choice about what goes in.
- Portfolios are not primarily for display, but rather, a shifting and growing repository of developing processes and ideas. It is a personal melting pot that the student uses to reflect his or her own literacy development.
- The teacher's role in portfolio development is that of a consultant who helps convince the student that the work should show a variety of materials.
- The portfolio should contain numerous and varied pieces written and revised in response to reading. They should be reflective collections.
- At a minimum, there should be four one-on-one teacher/student discussions each semester about the portfolio.
- Keeping the portfolio is an ongoing process and reflects progress over time. (pg. 35)

Management of Groups

For some, management can be a strong deterrent in deciding whether or not to use small groups for reading instruction. Some teachers may be overwhelmed by the planning involved or wonder what to do with the other twenty students in the class while she is working with a small group. The use of small groups in the classroom is only as effective as the management system allows. The teacher must have planned blocks of time in which he/she can lead the groups virtually uninterrupted by the other students in the class. This may sound impossible, but it can be accomplished through the use of learning centers.

Learning centers are an excellent way to have students working independently on meaningful activities while the teacher works with a small group. Learning centers should not just be packets of busy work, but rather a collection of activities that engage the student and enhances the time spent in small groups. A variety of learning centers are easy to manage and many can go on throughout the year. The first step is careful planning by the teacher to create the centers. Marriott (1997) states that every center must be carefully created to ensure that it engages students in meaningful learning experiences, supports literacy goals, addresses important skills, and empowers students to employ their reading skills (pg.5). A few center ideas are listening center, art center, post office, independent reading, writing center, etc.

An important thing for a teacher to remember is that the purpose of centers is not just to keep the students busy. Learning centers can be an excellent time to incorporate different learning modalities, student choice, and varied activities into the reading curriculum. Holliman (1996) suggests that several benefits exist for the teacher and the student:

1. Centers give the teacher more time to interact with students.
2. Centers give the teacher the opportunity to meet the needs of the individual students through flexible grouping and varied activities.
3. Centers allow for different learning styles.
4. Centers encourage positive behavior because students are actively involved and are allowed to make choices.
5. Centers give students the opportunity to explore, practice and apply skills, problem solve, think critically, and collaborate with classmates (pg. 5).

Many systems exist to plan and move students through the centers the teacher creates. The system used may depend on the independence level of the students, teacher preference, and the amount of help available in the form of aides or volunteers. Two popular systems of moving students through centers are the rotation system and the self-selected (contract) system.

The rotation system involves the teacher assigning students to heterogeneous groups and literally rotating the students through the centers until each center is completed. A specific time is normally allotted for each center and the teacher keeps track of time through a timer. A rotation chart or wheel is usually used in the rotation system to keep track of where groups are. The self-selected system is another way of moving students through centers. This system usually involves a contract each student uses to move through the centers. The student has centers listed on the contract and ideas of what to do when all centers are completed. The student has more independence and choice involved in this self-selected system.

Parent volunteers and classroom aides can also be incorporated into reading instruction while the teacher is working with a small group. A parent or aide can be easily trained to lead a center for the teacher. The teacher must meet with the helper before incorporating his/her help into the classroom instruction. Expectations and instructions must be clearly expressed by the teacher in order for the helper to successfully work in the classroom.

Using Technology in Reading Groups

Computers can effectively be used in small groups as an instructional tool to supplement a reading program. "Computer based reading instruction (CBRI) involves students in the direct use of computer software programs in order to improve their reading abilities in the areas of vocabulary,

comprehension, and print skills" (Case & Truscott, 1999, pg.361). Several advantages to using computers in reading program exist.

> The computer provides immediate feedback on performance and repeated practice when necessary, and computers provide a comfortable forum in which students with low self-esteem can participate. Reinforcing classroom reading instruction with computer use has been shown to supply a motivational force that can encourage a more positive attitude toward reading and learning in young readers, and thus provide for extended concentration and ability to attend (Case & Truscott, 1999, pg. 362).

Educators must choose software carefully in order that it may enhance and not detract from the reading instruction. Case & Truscott (1999) stress the importance of educators only using software that is child-centered, process-oriented, motivational, and parallels what is happening in the classroom. The use of a computer for reading should not just be a form of busy work for the student, but rather strengthen instruction. When choosing a software program Williams & Hoover (1991) recommend an educator ask three essential questions: "first, does it interact with the reader; second, does it engage the reader in both text-based and knowledge-based processing; and third, does it build new background knowledge as well as activate existing background knowledge" (pg. 336).

Electronic books are a form of computer software that can be incorporated into a primary reading program easily and effectively. Electronic books are familiar stories converted into interactive stories on CD-ROM that has the capability of reading the story aloud while the child is encouraged to follow along by reading the text. "Electronic books have been shown to: 1) make reading more enjoyable and less frustrating, 2) aid in developing decoding skills and improving fluency, and 3) provide effective individual support" (Case & Truscott, 1999, pg. 362).

Another software program that can be effectively used in small groups for reading is Hyperstudio. Eisenwine & Hunt (2000) suggest using Hyperstudio to create talking books for the children in the small group using an enlarged primary font and exaggerated spaces between the words. The computer reads the word aloud as the child points and clicks with the mouse. The best part about using Hyperstudio is the flexibility and variety by being able to create your own text. Stories can be created by the student or teacher in a particular area of interest to further motivate the student in reading. "The content-based stories help to tie literacy skills with unit highlight through the use of a single computer. We find the hypertext programs to be a motivational tool with children. Although nothing takes the place of a real book in a child's hand, these products offer a refreshing, new way of looking at print for many students" (Eisenwine & Hunt, 2000, pg. 457).

Conclusion

Small groups are an effective strategy in teaching reading in the primary grades. Teaching solely to the whole group does not allow for the varying needs of students in the classroom. "The increasing heterogeneity of classrooms in this nation coupled with the movement in many districts to issue only grade-level basals in each class creates a situation where the task of differentiating instruction is more essential than ever" (Moody & Schumm, 1999, pg. 323).

Ability groups are not the answer to the reading dilemma either. Studies have shown that homogeneous, ability groups may not effectively meet the needs of the middle and low groups. Ability groups have also had social consequences for the students involved. An effective alternative to ability groups are flexible groups so that the teacher can meet student's needs while avoiding the stigma attached to high, medium, and low groups.

A teacher's desire to meet the needs of her students is at the core of using small groups for reading instruction in the primary classroom. At the heart of this issue is the philosophy that every child is teachable, has the ability to learn, and is worthy of being taught. It is important to remember that each and every child is a unique and loved child of God and must be valued by parents, teachers, administrators and the community as such. A child must have his needs met by the teacher regardless of whether he is gifted in reading or struggling with the basics. When a teacher takes the

time and effort necessary to meet a child where he's at in a given area it empowers him to excel and achieve. This can in turn make the child feel value and worth in the classroom setting and in life in general.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14, NIV). The message of this simple statement rings true in the education of children today. Teachers have the responsibility to encourage children to flourish and not to hinder them. The lack of quality time, instruction, and appropriate strategies can hinder children in their reading ability. Just as Jesus encouraged children to come to him, a teacher should encourage children to do the same in the classroom. Thus, the act of bringing students together in small groups gives students time to excel and feel valued.

Teachers also have the wonderful opportunity of being role models in their school and community. A teacher who goes the extra mile for her students will make an impact in not only that child's life, but other lives as well. The love of Jesus can be shared in a real way through a teacher's dedication to knowing the needs of each student and meeting them whenever possible. A Christian teacher must have a heart for her students, be intentional in showing the love of Christ, show compassion for students, and always strive to do her best.

Sadly, some teachers are reluctant to use small groups for reading due to time needed in preparation, management concerns and lack of training. "Though the value of alternative grouping formats for reading instruction may seem obvious to some, recent research has revealed that many teachers consider whole class instruction to be the preferred approach to reading instruction in both special and general education settings" (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999, pg. 408).

Whole group teaching is necessary for teaching reading and should not be thrown out, but the used of small groups is an effective strategy that should be incorporated into the classroom as well. Using small groups along with whole group instruction will enable the teacher to meet the needs of every child in the classroom. It is important for the teacher to find the right balance of whole group and small group sessions for reading. Teachers must also remember that good planning, management, and use of authentic assessment are vital for effective small groups.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9, NIV). Teachers should put into practice this good advice to strive for excellence and find opportunities to impact children in a meaningful way. The

challenge of implementing a new strategy, such as using small groups for reading instruction, can be the way a teacher touches a life and makes a lasting impact on a child. When small groups are implemented effectively by the teacher, the students are the ones to gain by achieving reading success and confidence. Every teacher has the opportunity to unlock this success in each child in the classroom and to open the door to the wonderful world of reading.

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